

FINDING SERENITY

Three Northern California spiritual retreats help visitors tap into life-changing potential. By Nina Amir

Every year, an estimated 40 percent of Americans make New Year's resolutions. Despite their good intentions, only 8 percent actually achieve the goals they set on Dec. 31. ¶ Given these facts, it's not surprising that we spend about \$10.4 billion per year for motivational and self-improvement books, programs and products, according to market analysts. But is this money well spent? Considering so few of us carry out our resolutions, it's likely we're not using the lessons our purchases have to offer. ¶ The reason for this is simple: Real change happens from within. Today more and more people are making that discovery as participants in spiritual retreats throughout Northern California. By going within to find the consciousness, attitude and wisdom to help us make changes, we can often achieve the long-term improvements we're looking for. »

The Great Lawn at Esalen overlooks stunning, panoramic ocean views. Photograph by Aatish Mehmood



RESOLUTION OF A DIFFERENT STRIPE

If you choose to attend a personal retreat instead of a New Year's Eve party this year, you won't be alone. Chelsea Rappel, program director at Ratna Ling Retreat Center in Cazadero, says, "More people are finding comfort and joy around the holidays by taking a retreat."

January is when people often ask themselves how to move forward and how to reconnect with what's meaningful in their lives, explains David Zimmerman, program director for San Francisco Zen Center in San Francisco. "At that time of the year, we see people coming to the Zen Center to find ways to be mindful in their lives, to connect in ways that are from their heart, that are less superficial, more grounded, joyful, quiet."

A spiritual retreat provides a wonderful way to quiet the mind and reconnect with the heart—with our innermost intentions—and "from that place determine how to move forward in one's life," Zimmerman says. "This is not so much a resolution but helping one reconnect with what is most important in one's life and use that as one's anchor point going forward."

The inner work done on retreat helps us make the kind of changes we normally describe when setting New Year's resolutions. "Intentions are merely thoughts," Rappel says. "Thoughts can be hopeful or inspiring, but until that thought can be embodied fully through action, the new thought never has the chance to become a new pattern. Tension within our daily lives, whether it's tight deadlines at work or the bills piling up at home, can create an environment that makes it easy to resort back to the deeply set grooves of our old patterns."

Going on retreat, however, can offer the much-needed time and space vital to putting resolute thoughts into action. "A peaceful and positive space with the support of like-minded individuals and healing practices can be like the sunlight that nurtures the seed of our intention," Rappel explains.

Indeed, self-exploration around the holidays helps people make lasting rather than short-term changes, according to Cheryl Fraenzl, director of programs at Esalen Institute in Big Sur. She says, "Prior to being in my position, for about four years in a row, I spent time at Esalen in December or January as either a workshop participant or as a monthlong work scholar. I considered this part of my time to renew and reflect and to come to understand the changes I wanted to make in my life and how I might manifest them." She feels this process resulted in her current position at Esalen. "Not only do I think it is possible for a retreat to help with New Year's resolutions, I know it to be true from personal experience."

This region is home to some of the best and most well-known personal retreat centers in the nation, all of which are an easy drive from the South Bay. Following are three facilities that offer schedules and programs to suit most needs and tastes. Each is situated in a beautiful, out-of-the way place where it's possible to cut yourself off from technology and the "noise" of the world so you can hear what is going on within yourself—and pursue the positive changes in your life.

FROM TOP: BILL TIPPER; DOUG ELLIS; AATISH MEHMOOD



Nestled on lush grounds, Esalen's Lodge (top) houses the office, bookstore, dining hall and kitchen. Christopher LaRose (middle), from the center's farm and garden crew, carries a fresh crop of carrots. The Murphy House (bottom) is named for an Esalen founder.



One of the decorative iron lamps found throughout Esalen's 120 acres illuminates the pathways and surrounding flora, while casting a glow over a pool outside the lodge. In the background, a stately cypress tree, stark against the evening sky, stands watch.

A Coastal Retreat

ESALEN

ESALEN SITS NESTLED on 120 acres between mountain and ocean in Big Sur. Known for breathtaking views and the constant sound of the ocean, this retreat center has an unparalleled 50-year history and a worldwide reputation as a place for those who seek that which is "deeper, richer, more enduring rather than that which is stronger, faster, higher."

Fraenzl says what makes Esalen unique is the offering of "unconventional ways of living and working and learning together" and "its air of freedom, choice and personal responsibility, its simplicity without pretension and, of course, its healing hot spring waters along with Esalen massages." She adds, "The Esalen family, both on site and out in the world, is unusually strong and bonded."

In fact, more than 750,000 people have attended Esalen's 600 yearly workshops and programs, all of which are devoted to cultivating deep change in self and society. Programs run the gamut: consciousness, bodywork, life purpose, yoga, neuroscience, thriving in uncertainty and developing gratitude. All, says Fraenzl, support Esalen's mission of personal and social transformation. "Many of our groups tend to be more intimate and, therefore, create more safety, allowing people to go deeper. ... In general, I think Esalen uniquely offers deeper programming in psychology and psychological process as well as massage and somatics."

AATISH MEHMOOD

Scott Taylor of Santa Cruz has been going to Esalen since 1969. "Whenever I leave Esalen, I feel like I've taken a little journey into a place that helps me function better in the real world," he says.

You can find a variety of shared accommodations at Esalen. Additionally, premium rooms with greater privacy, upgraded bathrooms and other enhancements are available. The site also has three Point houses nested behind the Esalen Garden and perched at the cliff's edge with views of the Pacific Ocean. "We are not a luxury hotel," Fraenzl says. "The top-tier accommodations are breathtaking and beautiful; however, most of the basic standard rooms are simple and carry the flavor of Big Sur from back in the day."

Taylor reports that Esalen hasn't changed physically much since he began visiting in the late '60s. He notes, "The accommodations are adequate but certainly not first class," but most visitors don't come for the rooms rather for the grounds, the people, the teachings.

Taylor says that Esalen is unlike other places due to its history in the development of human consciousness as well as its unique location. He concludes, "It is in one of the most beautiful places in the world. The people who come there primarily come to take seminars from world-class teachers and thinkers, and it can be a wonderful place to meet people."

Holly Blue Hawkins of Aptos grew up in Santa Barbara in the '60s and considered the Coast Highway to San Francisco her



The setting sun (top left) bathes Ratna Ling courtyard in warm tones of orange and pink. A vegetarian sushi feast prepared by Ratna Ling head chef Jeremy Kochan and sous chef Jessica Maynard (top right) awaits retreat visitors. In the morning, guests greet the day with Sunrise Yoga classes.

“beaten path.” She says, “Esalen has always sparkled like a bright star in the sky of my firmament. My first-ever program there was five days with Angeles Arrien (Cross-Cultural Shamanic Practices) in the early 1990s. There were Gestalt weekends with the incomparable Mariah Fenton Gladys, a five-day with Anna Halprin, a weekend long ago about Chaos, Photography and Life. And, of course, the after-midnight trip to the baths offered to outsiders between 2 and 4 a.m.”

Hawkins has always been poignantly aware of the Esalen history. “When I first walked into the dining hall, I felt awe and emotion welling up in me to be in those ‘hallowed halls’ once visited by the likes of Stan and Christina Grof, Ida May Rolf, Joseph Campbell, Fritz Perls, Dick Price ... and on and on,” she relates.

Don’t be intimidated by the history or old stereotypes about nude hippies (due to the clothing-optional hot springs) associated with Esalen, cautions Fraenzl. “If the reader has not done any personal work in a supportive environment ... Esalen happens to be an incredible place where it is safe to take that first step.”

The following Esalen offerings are of most interest to those who would like a retreat around the New Year: New Year’s Silent Meditation Retreat on Dec. 29-Jan. 3 and This Year I Will ... How To Change A Habit, Keep a Resolution or Make a Dream Come True on Dec. 27-29. 55000 Highway 1, Big Sur; 831/667-3000; esalen.org

A Redwoods Retreat

RATNA LING RETREAT CENTER

THE SOARING TIMBERFRAME retreat facility known as Ratna Ling is one of western Sonoma County’s hidden jewels. Indeed, Ratna Ling means “Jewel Place” in Tibetan, and the center is nestled about 1,200 feet above the breathtaking Pacific Ocean just 2½ hours north of the Golden Gate Bridge

in Cazadero. The grounds offer visitors redwood groves, meditation gardens and trails winding to the ocean. Inside, you can find a spacious Yoga Room with radiant heated cork floors, the Dharma Library with its cozy fireplace and The Lodge with its expansive dining room.

Sprinkled among the forested landscape of the Ratna Ling grounds are 14 private cottages, each within a three-to eight-minute walk from the main lodge and providing accommodations for up to four guests. At this center, you don’t have to rough it to go within. Your modern living space includes a sitting room, bathroom and deck either looking over redwoods, the valley or the grounds. Visitors also enjoy most of the conveniences of home, including complimentary wireless Internet and domestic telephone service.

Tibetan Lama Tarchang Tulku, who brought the Tibetan Buddhist Nyingma tradition to the United States in 1968, founded the Ratna Ling Retreat Center in 2004 as a non-profit organization to serve as an intentional and spiritual community of teachers, students and resident volunteers committed to practicing spirituality in everyday life. Guided by Tibetan Buddhist principles, those who live and work here focus on wisdom, compassion, harmony and caring.

Everything about Ratna Ling centers around creating an environment that nourishes body, mind and sense. Rather than “doing,” you come to Ratna Ling to experience “being.”

Aud Nachilo of Oakland has been on retreat at Ratna Ling only once, but she can compare the experience to her retreats at other centers. She says, “The meditation facilities at Ratna Ling are one of the best I’ve seen in the Bay Area. Also, the accommodations are outstanding and the food is phenomenal.”

Rappel tells people to “retreat” themselves to a visit to Ratna Ling. She says what makes the center most unique is its blend of “luxurious modern accommodations and aesthetically beautiful facilities with the warmth and support of an intentional, spiritual community that studies and practices ‘the Dharma.’” She explains, “We want to make you comfortable to make it possible for you to do the work you came here to do.”

The focus on Tibetan Buddhism is ever present in a schedule of yoga, meditation and educational classes, but the atmosphere is one of openness. You can take a personal retreat at Ratna Ling and be on your own schedule and do what you feel moved to do.

“Sometimes that’s what you need,” says Rappel. “We offer a mix of ancient powerful teaching with open space to just be. We invite people to just come here and let things unfold. Be here and just breathe.”

Guests also can attend a Ratna Ling Program—usually weekend group retreats with faculty-led workshops on subjects such as Tibetan Yoga, meditation, chanting, vegetarian cooking and Ayurveda. Also offered are retreats focusing on a variety of topics and led by teachers from around the world. Additionally, visitors may participate in the Ratna Ling volunteer work study program.

Many retreat centers have volunteers in addition to staff. Ratna Ling is run completely by full-time resident volunteers, which makes it unique. “We all live here as an intentional community, doing this work in the form of karma yoga or selfless service supporting the retreat center and the

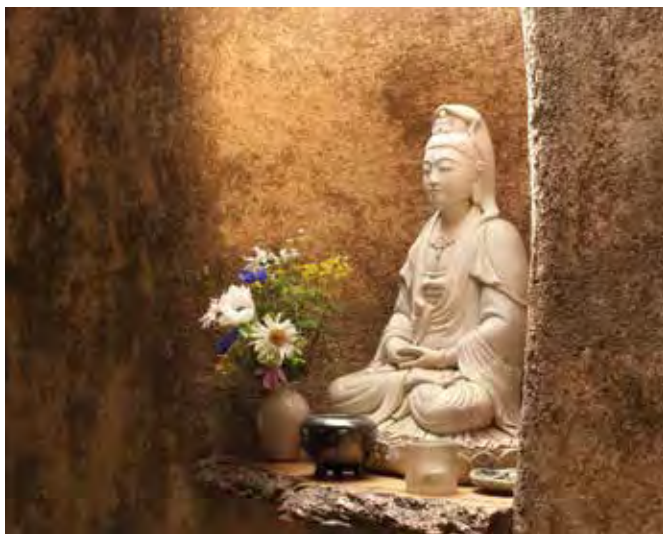


Full-time resident volunteers, including groundskeeper David Stuart, support Ratna Ling in many ways, such as harvesting produce from its vegetable garden.

GO WITHIN AND STAY PUT

Can’t get away for a personal retreat? Do the next best thing.

- **TUB TIME** Hang a do-not-disturb sign on the door and retreat to the bathroom for a nice hot soak. Sprinkle in fragrant bath salts, light candles, turn on your favorite music, breathe deeply, soak and meditate. Re-enter the world slowly, fully relaxed.
- **SPECIAL SPACE** Choose a room in your home where you can spend time in personal reflection—meditating, praying, writing in a journal, for example. Bring in favorite objects, such as crystals, candles, photos, books and even an iPod or CD player. Then spend the allotted time quietly, doing what you want.
- **NATURAL WONDER** If you have a quiet and secluded yard or live close to a lake, river or ocean, schedule a few hours or a day to sit quietly outside. Meditating near water or in nature, even for a few hours, can prove quite rejuvenating; some also find it spiritual. You can even do this type of retreat on your deck or patio.
- **SILENCE IS GOLDEN** If you live alone, this is easy; if you live with others, you will need to make arrangements with your family. Plan a period of time to be completely silent at home. This means no speaking, even to the pizza delivery man. Spend your time meditating, journaling, reading, being introspective. You also can exercise. But you cannot speak to anyone. Steer clear of computer and other electronics as well.
- **A MIND TO MEDITATE** Like the silent retreat, make time for solitude at home, but spend your time meditating for long periods (one or more hours at a time for several periods each day). You can choose to do this with your spouse or a friend as if you were at a meditation center.



At Green Gulch, Zen priest Steve Weintraub (top) welcomes visitors to the Zendo, or meditation hall. The eco-designed Garden Shed (middle) features an altar to Avalokiteshvara, divine being of compassion. Students (bottom) wait to speak privately in dokusan with the Abbot.

projects. We come together every night and practice and study or meditate,” explains Rappel. “We feel the work is bigger than ourselves.”

Nachilo says, “Because Ratna Ling has a living community within the retreat center, there is a deep groundedness about the center that permeates the people there. There is a sense of settledness about them, a perfect balance of walking into a community but this completely being your own retreat.”

Among several winter retreats at Ratna Ling worth noting are: Healing, Mindfulness and Compassion Retreat and Seasons of Change Ayurveda Retreats: Winter Wellness. 35755 Hauser Bridge Road, Cazadero; 707/847-3399; ratnaling.org

A Valley Retreat

GREEN GULCH FARM

SAN FRANCISCO ZEN CENTER is one of the largest Buddhist sanghas outside Asia. Established in 1962 by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, the author of the modern spiritual classic, “Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind,” and his American students, it has three practice places: City Center in San Francisco; Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in Carmel Valley; and Green Gulch Farm in Marin County.

City Center is an urban temple with a variety of programs for all levels and Tassajara, a true Zen Buddhist monastery, is open to guests only six months of the year beginning in May. Green Gulch Farm Zen Center offers a variety of retreats year-round. Known as the Green Dragon Temple (Soryu-ji), it serves as a Buddhist practice center in the Japanese Soto Zen tradition. This means it offers training in Zen meditation and ordinary work.

Located in a Marin County valley that opens out onto the Pacific Ocean, Green Gulch features an organic farm and garden on the property, as well as a guest house and conference center that holds up to 30 people. Muir Beach is just a 20-minute walk away, and the surrounding hills offer miles of trails up and down the coast and into nearby Muir Woods National Monument.

Zimmerman describes the retreat experience this way: “We all eat together in the guest dining room, and all meals are served in the Japanese Zen manner, in a meditative way. The rooms are Japanese style, although they do all have beds.” Additionally, most retreats follow a typical Zen meditation schedule: early morning meditation, study time, a dharma talk or class, community work time and evening meditation time and dharma talk. “The idea is to live and study side by side,” he says.

Guests visit Green Gulch to awaken the “bodhisattva spirit” of kindness and helpfulness and to take advantage of the natural rhythms of temple life. They join in morning and evening meditation and Sunday morning lectures, or as volunteers in daily work around the grounds or facility. Programs at Green Gulch Farm are varied, ranging from public programs on Sundays that include zazen instruction, a dharma talk and tea to one-day or longer retreats.

One San Diego resident, Dave Garza, describes going to Green Gulch Farm as “off the grid. There are no phones ringing, No Internet. It’s quiet.” He calls the accommodations “comfortable and rustic” and the area “just stunning.”

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF GREEN GULCH FARM; CENTER FOR DIGITAL ARCHAEOLOGY; MARGO MORITZ



The organic flower, fruit and vegetable gardens of Green Gulch Farm Zen Center lie within a fertile valley on the edge of the Pacific Ocean in Marin County. One of three sites operated by the San Francisco Zen Center, scenic Green Gulch offers retreats and programs throughout the year.

Garza regularly attends Zen Buddhist New Year’s retreats there and feels the self-compassion it fosters helps a person create change. “After a retreat I feel better about myself and so make better choices about diet, exercise, vices and things like that,” he says. “For me, it is like a year-end rejuvenation. I can clear things out, start fresh, see my teachers, take time in nature,” he explains. “It’s rewarding for the soul. I come away feeling like I have a fresh look on life, have more patience, more interest in things and more drive.”

He also enjoys the Zen Buddhist temple atmosphere. “It’s really wonderful to be in group where everyone works together when there is a project in a way I’ve never felt outside the monastery. Everything is done as a group—eating, working, meditating. ...

STEPH WENDERSKI

No one is above anyone else. They have titles, but they are an equal person.”

An East Bay visitor, Eileen Hsuan, has also attended the Green Gulch Farm New Year’s Eve Retreat. She says, “There’s something wonderful about letting go of everyday concerns and being in a place with teachers, other students, and rituals that all support the intentional slowing down of things for the purpose of reflection and cultivation of mind.”

The two end-of-the-year Great Gulch Farm retreats are: The New Year’s Retreat, Dec. 27–Jan. 1 and a three-week intensive program in January. 1601 Shoreline Highway, Muir Beach; 415/383-3134; sfzc.org/ggf ■